DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 307 438 CE 052 512

TITLE An Evaluation of Quality Circles in Colleges of FE. Planning Staff Development No. 7.
INSTITUTION Further Education Unit, London (England).
REPORT NO ISBN-1-85338-111-X
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Colleges; Continuing Education; Outcomes of Education; Postsecondary Education; Problem Solving; *Program Effectiveness; *Program Implementation; Program Improvement; *Quality Circles; *Staff Development
IDENTIFIERS *Great Britain

ABSTRACT

Quality circles can be defined as small groups of employees who meet regularly to solve problems and to find ways of improving aspects of their work. Quality circles are based on western ideas, but developed in Japan. Well-established guidelines for quality circles include support from management, clear reasons for the program, support of unions, an enthusiastic facilitator, voluntary participation, adequate training for members, administrative considerations, evaluation, pilot studies, and recognition of achievements. Quality circles have been used at two colleges in Great Britain: Accrington and Rossendale College and Barnfield College. The differing experiences at the two colleges illustrate how quality circles might be used as an approach to staff development as well as a way of solving problems. There are common themes: the need for a facilitator for each circle; the need for the support of management, especially middle management; and a need for participants to feel that their recommendations would be considered by management and appropriate action taken. In both cases, quality circles are perceived to have contributed to the development of problem-solving and other skills that are applicable in other settings, especially for team-based and group activities, such as occur in staff-development workshops. (KC)

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STAFF DEVELOPMENT

An Evaluation of Quality Circles in Colleges of FE

This is the seventh in a series of bulletins resulting from an FEU project [illegible] 14 staff development' (RP334), aimed at supporting local education authorities in the process of managing and co-ordinating authority-wide schemes of staff development in response to the specific grant arrangements for the in-service training of teachers which came into operation in April 1987.

The second bulletin in this series — *Approaches to Staff Development* — included quality circles among suggested approaches to staff development. The bulletin briefly described the operation of quality circles at Barnfield College, Luton, and outlined an FEU-funded project at Accrington and Rossendale College — 'Evaluating quality circles as a management technique in a college of further education' (RP333). This project has now been completed. The full report, available from FEU, gives a detailed account of what happened and includes examples of the benefits deriving from the establishment of quality circles. This bulletin provides a summary of the main findings and includes a brief update of the quality circles initiative at Barnfield College. Its purpose is to provide information and guidance to those interested in using quality circles as an approach to staff development.

What are quality circles?

Quality circles are defined by the National Society of Quality Circles as 'small groups of employees who meet regularly to solve problems and to find ways of improving aspects of their work'. A definition used by the Accrington and Rossendale team suggests that small volunteer groups of workers meet for an hour a week with a trained leader, operating to a strict code of conduct, to consider work-related problems and recommend solutions which are then implemented, unless there are good reasons for not doing so. Barnfield College's work suggests a more informal approach, although circles were found to require a facilitator.

Quality Circle Programme Development: Some Key Issues (MSC, 1986) provides a handy guide to managers and others who might be thinking of introducing quality circles in manufacturing and service industries. It identifies pitfalls, suggests ways of avoiding these and examines the special needs of white-collar circles and those in service industries.

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Background

Quality circles are based on Western ideas, but developed in Japan. Around 300 companies in the UK have introduced quality circles. The main benefits have been found to be enhanced employee motivation and involvement, and cost effectiveness. Quality circles have played a central part in getting employees involved in their work and committed to their company, which in turn leads to quality improvements.

Most research and publicity about quality circles has been supportive of the concept, but some writers have argued that organisational culture in the West is so different from Japan that quality circles cannot succeed in the long term.

There are many parallels between colleges and the service sector of industry, such as intangible problems, a workforce spread between sites making meetings difficult, and quality circles not being close enough to the systems they want to change.

In North American educational institutions, quality circles have been used to tackle a wide range of problems, mainly among support staff. They have been generally unsuccessful because of the absence of participatory management styles, lack of commitment from all levels of management, proliferation of committees, inadequate resources and lack of a clear definition of quality control. However, many individuals have benefited from increased job satisfaction, participation, 'ownership' of solutions and greater efficiency.

In addition to the Accrington and Rossendale College experiment, there have been two experiments in quality circles in further education in Britain which have been reported on — High Peak College (Field and Harrison, *Quality Circles: A Strategy for Personnel and Curriculum Development.* IB Paper 1083, FESC, 1983) Barnfield College, Luton (Blundell, *Association of Professional Tutors Journal*, 1986). Both show distinct differences from a pure

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quality circles concept although there are some indications that less formal approaches may be more appropriate to the consideration of curriculum issues than a more rigid quality circle format.

General guidelines

There are well-established general guidelines from the industrial and commercial sector for getting quality circle concepts off the ground. These are listed in *Quality Circle Programme Development* (MSC, 1986) and include:

- visible support and commitment from managers at every level and direct involvement by first-line managers; devising a strategy for getting middle management, in particular, to commit themselves to circles;
- clear ideas, on the part of the organisation, as to why the programme was being introduced;
- support of trade union representatives;
- an enthusiastic and committed facilitator;
- voluntary participation of members;
- provision of adequate training for members and education on the concept for others who are likely to be involved; deciding how this should be achieved;
- deciding whether circles would be seen as part of a department's normal activities;
- deciding what qualities are required of leaders of individual circles;
- determining the frequency and timing of meetings;
- deciding on a method of evaluating circles;
- a pilot-study approach before a full-scale launch;
- recognition of achievements.

Accrington and Rossendale College

Mike Austin, the principal, writes:

> Accrington and Rossendale College is a college which assumed its tertiary role in 1975, having been previously a traditional college of further education. Much of the ethos of the college and its organisational structure can be traced back to pre-tertiary days. There has been a strong tradition of departmental autonomy and a heavy concentration on hierarchy and linear management systems. In the last four years there has been almost complete change in the Senior Management Team. Many staff thought in traditional terms about their role and their responsibility within the decision-making process. Bluntly, this meant that Lecturers I thought that they should defer to Lecturers II, Lecturers II to Senior Lecturers and so on. This led to some apathy and some frustration.
>
> When looking for ways to break this apparent deadlock it rapidly became evident to me that it might well be worthwhile looking outside the education service for other models of organisational structure which gave more responsibility and accountability to individuals throughout the college. One particularly large group who had consistently and traditionally felt excluded from the decision-making process was the support staff. Quality circles suggested themselves as an interesting phenomenon. Evidence seemed to suggest that successful quality circles led to an improvement in morale, a closer identity with the organisation in which members worked, and in industrial circumstances some highly successful decision making on issues of direct concern to circle members.
>
> It seemed that it would be worthwhile to attempt to introduce quality circles to the college, assuming that necessary participation could be achieved and that the project had the support of the Management Team of the college.
>
> FEU funding was sought to support the project. Nobody knew whether quality circles would work. Nobody knew what the outcomes would be, but, if successful, it was clear that quality circles offered the opportunity for other colleges to open up the decision-making process to more staff in a more participatory way.
>
> I expected that the project would encourage some people, who had never previously considered doing so, to take part in the decision-making process. I expected that the college would gain greatly from these new perspectives, not only in terms of staff morale, but because genuinely new perspectives and insights would be the result. I also expected some resistance and reservations from those who might feel their position threatened, particularly middle managers at Section Leader level, and from those whose interest was best served by maintaining the status quo.

The project

The main purpose of the project was to:

- involve staff in participatory management;
- evolve and test a quality circle model which was transferable to other institutions;
- evaluate the effectiveness of the model;
- evaluate quality circles as a process of staff development.

FEU funding enabled the college to use a management consultant who had worked with college staff on a number of innovative projects and had particular interest and expertise in quality circles.

The programme was carefully introduced to staff at a series of meetings and their views canvassed. The Academic Board was consulted. The Principal made clear his support for the project and volunteers were sought to undergo leader training. Following the training, four circles formed — one among library staff, one among technician staff (but led by a member of the teaching staff), one among administrative staff (which included members of the teaching staff), and one among teaching staff in the Business and Management Studies Department — involving in total 10-15% of the teaching staff. Problems considered included overdue library books, the operation of BTEC courses, insurance, the external appearance of the

college, and storage space. Three of the circles have made presentations to management.

The operation of quality circles is best illustrated by reference to one of the circles, composed mainly of administrative staff. Weekly meetings were decided on until the techniques had been learned, following which meetings were held every two weeks. The participants:

- learned the techniques;
- generated a list of problems;
- refined the list and decided on a problem — a lack of storage space;
- brainstormed and defined causes;
- constructed a cause and effect diagram;
- drew up checklists for the collection of data;
- analysed data to identify major cause of problem;
- presented a range of solutions to management.

They then moved on to the next problem, having implemented the solutions agreed by management.

The programme was managed by a project steering committee, a project director operating as quality circle facilitator, and a co-ordinating committee consisting of the Principal, quality circle leaders, union representatives, the facilitator and representatives of various college functions. This group, in addition to advising and supporting circle leaders and constantly reviewing progress, helped to organise training for quality circle members, trainers, and middle managers. The professional expertise and experience of the consultant was seen as invaluable throughout.

Benefits and problems

Evaluation was an integral part of the project. On the basis of this evaluation, Accrington and Rossendale College formed opinions on both the benefits and problems of introducing quality circles.

Benefits include:

- the staff-development opportunities created and the consequent growth in confidence, especially for support staff;
- the solution of problems;
- the value of avoiding rushed decision making (The most obvious solution is often not the best one. All options must be considered.);
- the value of techniques used in the circles in other settings, including course team meetings and college working parties;
- their value in team building.

The main problems were:

- opposition from some middle managers who had failed to see quality circles as 'real work';
- a cynical reaction from some teaching staff;
- being too inflexible to solve central curriculum problems (selective use of techniques may be helpful in overcoming this);
- taking a long time to achieve results.

Guidelines for other colleges

The lessons learned from Accrington and Rossendale College, which may be of value to other colleges wishing to introduce quality circles, are:

- Management style should be as open as possible.
- Observance of the voluntary principle is vital. A circle must decide its own agenda.
- Management must be supportive at all levels. Trust is necessary.
- When introduced to the concept, teaching staff will be happier if educational precedents are stressed. Examples from industry and commerce may provoke a cynical reaction.
- Circles are particularly valuable among support staff.
- Many of the blocks to circle success are at middle management level.
- Circles need adequate resources such as consultant time, facilitator time, meeting places, remission time.
- Circles need the support of formal structures such as the Academic Board.

Tim Atkinson, the project director, stated at the end of the project: 'Quality circles are not a panacea, but they can have dramatic results in terms of staff involvement, morale, and identification with the aims of the organisation. There are no disadvantages to introducing a quality circle programme, only varied levels of success.'

Mike Austin, the principal, thought that 'The college has been changed as a result of the introduction of the programme, which is continuing to develop after the period of FEU funding has finished. Had I known then what I know now, I would have pursued the idea of the project with equal enthusiasm.'

Barnfield College

Quality circles were used as a form of staff development at Barnfield College, although the approach was different to that at Accrington and Rossendale College. The quality circle format was not rigidly adhered to. A cycle of events evolved — problems identified and addressed by quality circles became workshops for spending time looking in more detail at possible solutions; suggested solutions were referred to staff meetings; staff meetings referred solutions to quality circles.

Quality circles were found to be a useful mechanism for staff to exchange ideas on how to solve problems connected with teaching. The following kinds of issues were dealt with:

- *Big issues* (ones that seem intractable): Coping with all the demands of new initiatives, loss of direction.

- *Philosophical issues:* The School of Art and Design looked at aesthetics v. commercialism; Humanities and Business Studies thought about what an educational philosophy ought to consist of.
- *Fairly easily resolvable issues:* Helping a colleague devise a strategy for coping with a problem student.
- *Recurring issues:* The problem of communication throughout the college.
- *Informative sessions:* Visiting speakers presented information on the responsive college, Professional, Industrial and Commercial Updating (PICKUP), and the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE), which became issues for problem solving.
- *Awareness raising:* Each circle looked at the problems associated with staff appraisal; two have considered strategies for coping with stress and time management.

Most participants perceived benefits:

- 'the only time we met together as a whole school';
- 'it's useful to chat over ideas';
- 'gives you a feeling of unity and solidarity';
- 'helps keep up morale';
- 'creates a better climate';
- 'provides a focus';
- 'helps us to formulate opinions';
- 'realisation that what you thought was unique to you is often a problem shared with others';
- 'practice in brainstorming techniques';
- 'integrative approach to problem-solving';
- 'identifying matters previously thought too sensitive for discussion';
- 'forces you to make time for staff development';
- 'an opportunity to make positive contribution to decision-making';
- group autonomy: 'During times of maximum stress we have to be bold enough to say "Today our real needs are elsewhere — let's cancel the quality circle" ';
- 'breaking down barriers between divisions';
- 'within the rules of brainstorming, an opportunity to express a wayward opinion in the confidence that it will not be rejected'.

There were some difficulties; middle management, as at Accrington and Rossendale, although not always convinced of the value of quality circles, tolerated them; managers were not always ready or able to consider the ideas generated by quality circles, and quality circles never got off the ground for administrative and support staff.

Quality circles survived for two years at the college, but ironically the arrival of the LEA Training Grants Scheme and a new principal brought the initiative to an end. The new principal took the bold step of instigating a common three-hour block for staff development across the whole college, enabling all staff to participate on a voluntary basis in workshops and team development, among other things. Colin Blundell, the professional tutor at the college and instigator of quality circles, was also the facilitator. This arduous task became impossible when the whole college had a block of staff development on Friday mornings. However, it is noteworthy that those who are most enthusiastic about attending cross-college workshops on Friday mornings are those who participated in quality circles. Some said they had derived a new self-confidence and a positive regard for their own contribution to group problem solving exercises.

Conclusions

The differing experiences at Accrington and Rossendale College and Barnfield College illustrate how quality circles might be used as an approach to staff development as well as a way of solving problems. There are common themes — the need for a facilitator for each circle; the need for the support of management, especially middle management; and a need for participants to feel that their recommendations would be considered by management and appropriate action taken.

Quality circles are only one of several possible approaches to staff development; they may help in the solution of many problems but be less appropriate for other identified needs. In both the cases cited above, they are perceived to have contributed to the development of problem-solving and other skills which are applicable in other settings, especially for team-based and group activities. What is important is to ensure that the approaches used for staff development meet the objectives of the staff-development programme. The work at Accrington and Rossendale and Barnfield suggests that quality circles merit consideration as one approach to the delivery of staff development.

For further information about FEU's work on 'Planning Staff Development', contact Mike Granger, FEU, 2 Orange Street, London WC2H 7WE. (tel: 01-321 0433 ext. 260). For details of the availability of FEU publications, contact the FEU Information Centre at the same address (ext. 256).

Printed by Barnes Design + Print Group, Maidenhead